Human Resources and Democracy Division
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Community-Based Primary Education:

Lessons Learned from the Basic Education Expansion Project (BEEP) in Mali

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Contents

Foreword

In the late 1980s, USAID's Africa Bureau mobilized to meet a congressional earmark for basic education. This earmark challenged the Bureau to develop African capacity to deliver, on a sustained basis, quality and equitable education to the majority of Africa's children.

In the early years of this challenge, USAID, in partnership with other donors and host country governments, focused on strengthening host-country ministries of education—their capacity to plan, fund, implement, and monitor education inputs. To meet African demand for primary education, this partnership must now broaden.

In this paper, Joe DeStefano tells the story of a flourishing partnership between donors, the host-country government, the private sector, and communities. May Mali's story inspire and inform similar partnerships across Africa!

—Julie Owen Rea
Office of Sustainable Development
Division of Human Resources and Democracy

Acknowledgments

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—Joseph DeStefano

Glossary of Acronyms and Abbreviations

BEEP	Basic Education Expansion Project
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CFA	Communauté Financière en Afrique
GER	Gross Enrollment Rate
IPN	Institut Pédagogique National
MEB	Ministère de l'Education de Base
NEF	Nouvelle Ecole Fondamentale
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PVO	Private Voluntary Organization
DNAFLA	Direction Nationale de l'Alphebétisation Fonctionelle et de la Linguistique Appliquée
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. Lessons Learned from the Basic Education Expansion Project (BEEP) in Mali

The information and analysis presented in this document are based on a recent visit to Mali and on information made available from the USAID Mission and Save the Children/USA. Much of the descriptive information on Save the Children's community schools project is drawn from documentation provided by Save the Children, including published reports, internal documents, and interviews. The intent of this report is to consolidate for USAID's Africa Bureau some of that information and to draw some initial lessons from USAID/Mali and Save the Children's experience.

SOME SIMPLE IDEAS:

- Education is something a village can organize and arrange for on its own.
- Commitment to the schooling of its children is an investment in the future of a village.
- A school can be created, managed, and financed by a community.

These are indeed simple ideas, but revolutionary as well. The spread of community-based primary education in Mali, and in particular the model that Save the Children piloted in the district of Kolondieba, can indeed be described as a revolution in the education sector. Village schools, those founded and run by communities, are refuting many previously held assumptions about how education can be provided to poor rural communities in Africa. The 62 schools launched with Save the Children support under a grant from USAID/Mali during the last three years are consistently demonstrating that:

- there are alternative mechanisms for delivering formal primary schooling;
- a school can be an integral part of a rural community and, as such, be responsive to the community's needs;
- local administration and management are not only possible, but carry with them tremendous returns in access, equity, and effectiveness; and
- effective instruction is achievable with "unqualified" teachers and limited supplies.

This paper assesses what USAID/Mali's Basic Education Expansion Project (BEEP) has accomplished with Save the Children in the Kolondieba district. It also examines the experience with two questions in mind: whether such an approach to expanding rural access to formal schooling is replicable, and what lessons can be learned from the approach that are relevant to education reform in general.

BACKGROUND

At the end of the 1980s access to formal basic education in Mali was stagnant if not declining. Government capacity to provide basic schooling was severely constrained because of persistent patterns of resource allocation that favored secondary and higher education. Another factor was the supply-constraint dominated approach to sectoral development. Governments' ability to expand access was constrained by the rate at which it was willing and able to allocate funds, organize the installation of schools, and hire teachers.

The detailed situation of primary education in the Kolondieba district helps illustrate this. In 1991/92 the gross enrollment rate (GER) in Kolondieba was 14 percent overall and only 8.5 percent for girls. There were 30 primary schools in the district, 13 of which were located in the five largest villages. The

other 17 schools served the remaining 202 villages.[1] Students from some villages were thus expected to walk as far as 10 kilometers to and from school. Alternatively, their parents were expected to pay for their children to board with families living near the schools.

Under the Malian government's Fourth Education Project (in conjunction with which the BEEP project was developed), the World Bank, French Cooperation, USAID, and other donors made funds available to the education sector for expansion and improvement of basic education. School construction was to be jointly funded, with the Ministry of Education using Fourth Education Project funds to cover 75 percent, and the communities contributing the remainder. From 1989 to 1994, 1,153 classrooms were built. USAID emphasized increasing access by improving the quality and efficiency of the education system, thus allowing more children to be served by the existing infrastructure.

Between 1989/90 and 1993/94, the overall primary GER increased from 22 to 33 percent; for girls' the increase was from 17 to 25 percent. In 1990, Save the Children began working with the Ministère de l'Education de Base (MEB) to help communities share the cost of school construction. The three-classroom school model has a total cost of US$ 30,000, which, according to the Fourth Education Project formula, leaves communities with a US$ 7,500 contribution. With Save the Children picking up the community contribution for the Kolondieba district, only one official school was constructed in 1991, and another in 1992.

The situation in most rural districts is similar. In a March 1995 meeting, the basic education inspector for the sub-region bordering Kolondieba, Bougouni-I presented statistics collected for the area under his administrative responsibility. They showed that even with 43 classes functioning on double shifts, the 49 first-cycle primary schools in Bougouni-I could only enroll 3,745 new students in the 1993/94 school year, leaving more than 47,000 six to eight-year-olds without school places (a recruitment rate of 7 percent). And the inspector had 60 requests from villages to open schools that he has not been able to respond to.

In fact, communities have had their requests for government schools consistently ignored, delayed, or refused, primarily because the MEB could not provide personnel (even where communities undertook to build schools on their own). Given the slow pace of expansion of access, different forms of community initiative have begun to emerge in Mali. Private schools, *écoles de base*, and village schools of various types have been started by individuals, communities, and associations. The experiment supported by USAID/Mali and Save the Children in Kolondieba was the first systematic attempt to help villages organize around the objective of establishing primary schools.

BREAKING THE MOLD

In 1992, Save the Children proposed a model for village schooling for the Kolondieba District. The model broke from the existing formal education paradigm in several important ways. It recognized that rural communities are not lacking in demand for education. What was perceived in Mali as low demand for basic education was due more to family dissatisfaction with what was being offered (and at what terms) than to lack of interest in schooling.

The model also recognized that basic formal instruction can be provided with simple interventions. What is given up to assure lower costs—lower teacher qualifications and lower material requirements—is made up for by an environment of higher community, teacher, and student commitment.

The village school model also made use of the partnership between Save the Children and local communities on the one hand, and Save the Children, USAID and education decisionmakers on the other. This partnership assisted community initiative and national policy-making to work in tandem.

Save the Children, following the example of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) schools, developed the model on the basis of three assumptions:[2]

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[1] Save the Children/USA, *A Step Towards Education for All*, 1993.

[2] See Save the Children/USA, *A Step Towards Education for All*, 1993.

- primary education costs can be drastically reduced without significantly reducing quality;
- given proper training, each community already has within its means the financial and human resources necessary to provide highly relevant primary education for its own children; and
- the Malian national political climate is conducive to decentralization of education and to the development of a dynamic partnership between the government and the non-governmental organization (NGO) community.

These assumptions were then exploited in the development of the model, which can be summarized in the following descriptions of the key characteristics of village schools:

Infrastructure
Buildings are built entirely by the communities using local materials, except for tin roofing and materials for latrines supplied by Save the Children.

Equipment
Save the Children supplies desks, a blackboard, and the first year's supply of notebooks and pens for students and teachers.

Recurrent Costs
Teacher salaries are paid by the village at an amount they determine. School maintenance is assured by the village. Save the Children covers recurrent costs associated with teacher training and supervision.

School Fees
Fees are 100 CFA francs per month per student (roughly US$ 0.20).

Students
Recruitment is on a triennial basis, drawing only from children in the village. Sixty children are enrolled at a time into two classes of 30 each. Major emphasis is placed on gender parity (Save the Children staff conduct equity sensitivity training).

Teacher Recruitment
Teachers are recruited by the village from among its own population, drawing on either those who have had some schooling, or those who have at least received literacy training in Bambara.

Teacher Training
Save the Children, in collaboration with the MEB's Institut pédagogique national (IPN) and the Direction nationale de l'alphebétisation fonctionelle et de la linguistique appliquée (DNAFLA), provides a one-month initial training, as well as an annual two-week in-service seminar.

Teacher Supervision
Save the Children education project staff are assigned supervision and support responsibilities, visiting schools once a week. Save the Children literacy, health, and credit staff also make regular visits to schools. The local education authority, (the circonscription scolaire) has also assigned a teacher supervisor to regularly visit and supervise community schools (transportation costs were assured by Save the Children).

Curriculum
Schools are using a modified curriculum that differs from the official government curriculum in several important ways:
- classes for at least the first three grades are taught in Bambara;
- basic reading, writing, and calculating skills are stressed in grade 1, and consolidated in grades 2 and 3;
- knowledge of village life, health, work and enterprise are introduced in grades 2 and 3; and
- introduction of French instruction is an option for grade 3.

The curriculum was developed in collaboration with IPN and DNAFLA.

School Management
The village school is administered by the school management committee. The committee is composed of locally-selected village leaders and/or parents of school children; the only requirement is that one literate person be on the committee. All school management decisions—recruitment of students and teach-

ers, financial management, school calendar, and hours of classes, etc.—are handled by the committee. Each committee receives a short orientation conducted by Save the Children.

STATUS

In its third year of operation, the project has grown to the point of being the main provider of formal education in grades 1-3 in the Kolondieba District. Table 1 summarizes the project's evolution in terms of the number of schools opened and the numbers of boys and girls enrolled.

Table 1: Schools and Enrollment

		1992/93	1993/94	1994/95
Schools	**New**	4	22	*36
	Total	4	26	62
Students	**New**	240	1,320	3,120
	Total**	240	1,528	4,638
Girls	**New**	120	660	1,560
	Total**	120	764	2,321
Boys	**New**	120	660	1,560
	Total**	120	764	2,317

Source: Save the Children/USA, Semi-Annual Report, 4/94-10/94.

*Schools established in 1994/95 include 16 supported through sub-contracts with 4 local NGOs in the Bougouni district.

**Cumulative totals take into account dropouts: 16 boys and 16 girls in 93/94 and 7 boys (including 4 deaths) and 3 girls in 1994/95.

Of the 4,638 students enrolled in 62 community schools under Save the Children's support, 2,718 are in the Kolondieba District, of which 1,361 are girls. This compares favorably to the 1,281 girls enrolled in official schools in Kolondieba. For the 1994/95 school year, Save the Children sub-contracted with four local NGOs to have them replicate the village school model in another four zones of the Bougouni District. This activity was supported by USAID and based on World Education's success in working with local NGOs. Save the Children trained the NGO staff and helped them start four village schools each. At the time of this writing those schools were reported functioning, as well as the schools Save the Children was working with directly.

The school year starts in November at the end of the harvest, and continues until the beginning of the rains and the planting season in May. Exact dates and times of classes are determined by individual school committees. Classes are in session six days a week for two or three hours per day. The free day is usually chosen to coincide with the village market day. One class meets in the morning and the other in the afternoon, so that a single classroom can serve the full enrollment.

Dropout from the first group of four schools launched in 1992/93 was relatively high (32 out of 240 or 13 percent). This could partly be explained by an initial attempt to recruit one class of adolescent (ages 9 to 12) boys and girls in each of the schools that first year. A Save the Children survey of dropouts revealed that 27 of the 32 were indeed adolescents. Reasons cited for dropouts were inability to continue to pay fees, boys leaving the village to pursue income-generating opportunities outside the village, and girls getting married.[3]

Student attendance records are maintained at all the schools by the teachers, and the management committees are notified in cases of prolonged or too frequent absence. Save the Children's survey of attendance records for the 22 schools opened in 1993/94 indicated all but two schools with attendance rates over 95 percent.

[3] Save the Children/USA survey of dropout in vilage schools.

No systematic assessment of student achievement has yet been undertaken (Save the Children is planning to conduct an empirical survey of student performance this year). Promotion rates for all the schools are much higher than in state schools. Figures for the 22 schools opened in 1993/94 show average promotion rates of over 99 percent, compared to 71 percent in government schools. Anecdotal evidence and classroom observations indicate that students are performing well in reading and writing in Bambara. In the four schools started in 1992/93, where students are now in the third grade, French has been introduced as a subject. Preliminary observations indicate that students are performing in French at least as well as their counterparts in the regular state schools.

School costs are significantly lower than they are at the official state schools, both in investment and recurrent terms. Schools are constructed and equipped (desks, benches, blackboard, teacher's tables, and chair) for roughly US$ 1,200, about 3 percent of the cost of an official primary school. Save the Children also underwrites each school's consumable materials (books, paper, pens, pencils, chalk, etc.) at a cost of approximately US$ 300 per year. Additional recurrent costs borne by Save the Children relate to supervision and support services, figures for which are not available, but that may represent a significant part of the recurrent operating expense. Teachers are paid 3,500 CFA francs (US$ 12.80) per month out of school fees and a general village association contribution. This is in contrast to civil servant teacher salaries of about 30,000 CFA francs (US$ 110).[4] A rough estimate of unit recurrent costs, excluding supervision services, would total US$ 7.13, compared to the estimated unit teacher cost (excluding non-salary inputs) in the official schools of US$ 22.00.

WHAT IS WORKING

As the figures above indicate, village schools are easily recruiting and retaining students. What has been most impressive is their ability to enroll girls and boys in perfect parity. While the conventional wisdom in Mali had long been that demand for primary education was low, the success of village schools indicates that the supply and demand dynamic was grossly misunderstood. Interviews with village families and school committees indicated that demand for education was high provided that:

- children are able to attend school in their own village. Sending children to official schools that are intended to serve 8 to 10 villages meant long distances from home to school or costly boarding of children with families in the towns where official schools are located. Most parents are unwilling or unable to support either of those options;
- the education is perceived as relevant to village needs; and
- parents feel they have a say in how the school is organized and run.

What USAID and Save the Children's experiment in Kolondieba has convincingly demonstrated is that the cost of putting in place schools that respond to the above criteria is one that rural families are so far willing to bear.

Beyond reversing the conventional thinking regarding demand for educational in rural areas, the village schools in Kolondieba have changed the basic paradigm under which primary education is provided in Mali. At the heart of that change is the relationship between the school and the community. In the past education was seen as the responsibility of the state and the school as something foreign to the village. The village school, on the other hand, belongs to the local community, and is organized, funded, run, and supported by the local community. It is also something about which the community is exceedingly proud.

More than just having a sense of ownership, the management committee runs the school. Villagers themselves decide on when the school will be in session, who will teach, and how much teachers will be paid. Villagers maintain the infrastructure, manage day-to-day concerns, and deal with the broader issues of whether to continue beyond third grade,

[4] Cost figures are drawn from "Blazing the Trail: The Village Schools of Save the Children/USA in Mali," Jean-Pierre Velis, UNESCO, 19xx.

how to recruit new students, how to ensure that girls are enrolled, etc.

This flexing of local authority over something as important to rural families as the future of their children is changing how these villages see their role in their own development. In Ngola, where the school has been functioning for three years, the village is now confronted with deciding whether to continue the existing two classes to the fourth grade. When asked about their plans, the head of the management committee stated, "We want to build a new school so these students can continue and so that we can also recruit two new classes." When asked if they thought the state would or should help them, he replied, "We are going to do what we think is necessary for our children. If the state (or anyone else) wants to help us, so much the better. If not, we will do what we need to do."

Reducing the curriculum to basic language and computation skills has allowed the school day to be shortened, without compromising the amount of learning that actually takes place. Flexible calendar and hours also make it easier to fit schooling within village demands on children's time. Subjects identified as important to rural communities—the environment, health, sanitation, etc.—are introduced into the classroom through the readings, stories, and conversations covered in language lessons, keeping the curriculum from being cluttered by add-ons each time a new subject area is identified as important. When developing the curriculum, Save the Children wisely consulted with the IPN, so that schools would not easily be dismissed as second-rate by villagers or ministry officials. Similarly, the regional inspection and administrative authorities are asked to supervise and report on village schools, providing official recognition of the quality of the education being provided.

As discussed above, the expansion of official schooling has been severely constrained by the rate at which the MEB is able to recruit and pay for additional qualified teachers. Village schools are overcoming this constraint by recruiting teachers with much lower qualifications. The success of these schools, in fact, has been that they provide instruction at least on a par with official schools using teachers who have very little formal education. Most of the teaching staff have six or fewer years of schooling. Some have no formal schooling and have only received literacy training in Bambara. Yet, because teachers are members of the community (having been recruited locally), they are readily supported by the village (monetarily and otherwise), and they demonstrate a commitment to educating the village's children that is not always evident in official schools. Furthermore, the use of less-qualified teachers, recruited locally, is the main element of recurrent cost reduction.

One key to making effectively use of less-qualified personnel has been the switch to Bambara as the language of instruction. This certainly is beneficial to the children in that they acquire literacy skills more easily in their mother tongue, and then, after having mastered literacy, are better able to transfer their basic skills to a second language. It also makes it possible for parents to feel more connected to what their children are learning. Schools are able to make use of local folklore, legends, and stories, and are able to invite members of the village to give lessons, recount stories, and participate in the schooling of their children.

IMPACT BEYOND KOLONDIEBA

Beyond the impact these schools are having in the 62 villages in Kolondieba, the appearance in Mali of a successful village school model has helped alter the trajectory of education sector reform. In the past the development of basic education was held back by several factors, among which were:

- the MEB's refusal to recognize non-official schools;
- the MEB's imposition of standards that prevented communities from establishing schools; and
- resource constraints created by the government's unwillingness and inability to reallocate funds away from higher and secondary education subsidies and stipends.

The success of village schools in Kolondieba has contributed to the MEB's progress on all three of these fronts.

USAID/Mali decided to make an effort to encourage ministry officials, including the minister himself, to take note of what village schools were able to accomplish. The issues raised by the success of village schools essentially forced the ministry to reconsider some of the basic assumptions under which the sector was being managed. Foremost among those was the need to formally recognize alternative schools, whether private, community-based, NGO-affiliated, or other. The development of an official legal framework for non-governmental schools flowed out of open discussions among ministry officials, communities, NGOs, private entrepreneurs, parents' associations, etc. On the basis of the consensus reached among the various stakeholders, the government wrote and approved a legal framework granting official status to all non-governmental schools, and creating a special category for those run by communities, separate from for-profit private schools. This framework accomplishes two objectives. First, it includes non-governmental schools in the MEB's official definition of the education sector (meaning their students are counted among national statistics and students can move freely from community schools to formal public schools). Second, it constitutes the first step in establishing a mechanism whereby the state can provide funding for non-governmental schools.

In addition, it has helped the ministry reconsider standards for school construction, personnel, and school management. Prior to the spread of community-based schooling, the MEB operated under the assumption that standards were needed to assure a minimum quality provision of schooling. Village schools have illustrated that quality basic education can be delivered in buildings that are locally constructed, with teachers who are less-qualified and not civil servants, in languages other than French, and in a management environment determined and directed by private citizens (not MEB officials).

As the reform agenda for the education sector is being set, these lessons are being taken into account. The resulting sectoral policy, summarized in what is being called the *nouvelle école fondamentale* (NEF) embraces curricular reforms that include introduction of local language in grades 1 through 3, consolidation of the number of subjects, local recruitment and training of teachers, and greater community involvement in school management; strategies all drawn from the village school model.

Finally, some progress has been made on the long-standing debate over reducing higher and secondary education subsidies. Grassroots and NGO involvement in community schooling is spreading and is creating growing opposition in Mali to continued use of scarce resources to underwrite the education of privileged, mostly urban students. The result of this growing dissatisfaction with the status quo is that the government, for the first time, imposed academic and need-based criteria for awarding scholarships.

Another vehicle through which alternatives have been presented to the MEB is the recently formed education NGO umbrella group known as the *Groupe pivot/éducation de base*. USAID/Mali, Save the Children, and World Education have been providing support to this group and have thus helped facilitate dialogue between NGOs representing community interests and ministry officials. Much of the discussion on how the legal statutes governing village schools should be crafted was informed by this group.

CRITICAL ISSUES

This discussion of Save the Children and USAID/Mali's experience has so far focused on the positive aspects of the experience. However, it is equally important to address other critical issues associated with the spread of village schools in Mali. In fact, some of the concerns raised are a direct result of the success of the model. At present, the village school model for delivering education in rural Mali is being transformed from a pilot experiment to an integral element in the national education sector strategy. As discussed above, this is evident in the government's incorporation of many of the lessons from village schools into its definition of the NEF. It is also evident in USAID's strategy to expand what Save the Children has been doing by supporting the establishment of some 1,500 village schools over the next five years. This being the case, several important questions need to be addressed.

■ ***What happens to existing primary schools?***

The development of the NEF partly responds to this concern. Additional or newly established government primary schools could adhere to the NEF strategy, i.e., making use of local language in the first three grades and using locally recruited teachers. But what about existing schools? Will it be possible to convert those schools to conform to the NEF model? Certainly teachers who have civil servant status will not willingly convert to local contracts. Nor is it safe to assume that the curricular changes (in language of instruction and content) would be welcomed. Implementation of reforms will need to address these issues as they emerge. Resources will need to be devoted to the analysis and dialogue that will permit implementable strategies to be negotiated.

■ ***How will teachers unions react to the spread of non-union, non-civil servant teaching professionals undercutting the minimum salary?***

If non-governmental schooling increases, the existing civil servant teaching corps will feel more threatened by the growing ranks of teachers being paid substantially lower salaries. Conversely, as village teachers increase in numbers, they may grow to represent a collective force able to extract wage and status improvements that could drive up the cost of running village schools. In countries where non-governmental schools have been able to avoid this problem, it has been because of the existence of a fairly large reserve pool of unemployed, qualified individuals with reservation wages at or below the prevailing rate. Analysis of the available labor pool for staffing village schools is essential.[5]

■ ***After three years of village schooling, what then?***

Only four Save the Children supported schools will be completing a third year this year. However, as village schools multiply, the issue of what comes after the first three years will increasingly have to be confronted. The prevailing sentiment is that students should be able to continue after the third grade. This implies several issues for the village school system. First, can villages afford to run schools up through grade six? Using the triennial recruitment model, it would mean having two two-classroom schools in operation. Embedded in the question of affordability, is the issue of whether more highly qualified teachers will be needed for the upper primary grades, especially since instruction is intended to switch to French (following the NEF model).

Second, if village schools go beyond three years, where will personnel qualified to teach in French come from? Save the Children is presently conducting a survey of the potential local labor supply for teachers. Preliminary findings indicate unemployed individuals with more than six years of education are not available in sufficient numbers. A shortage of local teacher supply appears inevitable. This scarcity of qualified labor implies that at some future point the system will be faced with upward pressure on teachers' salaries (as discussed above).

■ ***How will demand evolve over time?***

The success of the model thus far can partly be attributed to having tailored the supply of primary education to the nature of village demand. What is unclear is how the nature of that demand will change over time or across regions. Villages in Kolondieba where schools have been started initially see the school as contributing to local development. As their children move through the primary grades, will they be content with that model of education, or will they begin to demand an education that is more in line with the standard formal model, especially if the education system develops along segmented lines as discussed below? At present the village school system is not perceived as offering second-rate education. It will be important to work on maintaining that impression as village schooling expands under USAID's amended project.

Some of the policy changes wrought under BEEP, particularly those pertaining to the legal status of

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5 The experience of USAID's project to support private schools in Haiti is particularly instructive on this point.

community schools, help address this issue. However, the effort to expand community schooling should include preparation for changes in the supply-demand dynamic as the education system develops over the next few years. It may be impossible to predict how demand will evolve, but mechanisms can be built into the supply approach that will allow it to adapt in response to variations in demand and context across regions and over time.

■ ***How does Mali avoid developing a segmented school system?***

Right now the provision of primary education is completely segmented, largely along urban and rural lines. In urban areas official schools exist and are essentially 100 percent state-financed. Few official schools exist in rural villages. Where village schools have been established, they are totally financed by the village (in the case of Kolondieba, with a subsidy from Save the Children). If this pattern is allowed to persist and village schools are promoted on a grand scale, public resources would be used to finance the education of the segment of the population with greater income (urban families tend to have higher incomes than rural families), and the lower income portion of the population would be expected to bear the full cost of educating their children. A strategy to deal with this potential for an inequitable provision of basic education needs to emerge.

■ ***Through what mechanism will the state provide funding to village schools?***

The only way to avoid the above scenario is to develop a mechanism through which the state will be able to funnel resources to village schools. The challenge is to find a mechanism that, while allowing the state to contribute significantly to the capital and recurrent cost of village schools, does not subvert the essential element of community control, oversight, and management of the schools. An added challenge is that some compensatory formula would also need to be built into such a mechanism so that the state could equalize resource disparities between villages in different regions of the country.

■ ***Is Kolondieba a special case?***

In planning to go to scale with the village school model tested successfully in Kolondieba, it is critical to determine to what extent that area represents a special case. Kolondieba is in a cotton-producing region. Cash crop producers have probably benefitted the most from the devaluation of the CFA franc. Would regions that are more cash-strapped than Kolondieba be able to pay teachers on a regular basis and to bear the other recurrent costs associated with operating a school? Even in some of the villages in Kolondieba, some teachers reported that their salary has not been paid for three to four months. Village cash flow problems could create disincentives both to existing teachers to apply themselves in class and to prospective teachers to accept contracts with school management committees. Generalization of the Kolondieba experience should proceed following a financial analysis of community capacity to finance primary education.

■ ***How many local languages will be used as media of instruction?***

If the village school/NEF model were applied nationally, a policy decision would need to be made regarding language of instruction. In the past in Mali, experiments with introducing local languages into the primary schools were unsuccessful partly because of the costs associated with introducing as many as 10 languages. As the number of languages go up, the possibilities for economies of scale in training, materials development, and materials procurement disappear. Literacy training is now offered in Mali in 10 languages, implying that as many could easily be proposed for introduction into formal schooling.

■ ***What about retention of local language literacy?***

A consistent problem with local language literacy has been the deterioration of literacy skills in the absence of reading matter in the local languages. Before adopting local languages as the media of instruction on a national scale, the issue of the utility of reading skills in those languages for those students

who will not continue to upper primary (where it is presumed they would acquire French literacy) will need to be addressed.

■ ***How will school/teacher support services be sustained?***

In Kolondieba, Save the Children either directly provides school and teacher support services or is underwriting the regional inspectorate's costs for providing it. That model is neither replicable in the absence of a funded PVO/NGO, nor is it sustainable. Furthermore, Save the Children reports that school support services constitutes an important part of the recurrent costs of operating village schools. The model that will be taken to scale will need to examine whether the costs incurred in providing those support services are balanced by the benefits derived from school visits. A cursory assessment of the types of support indicated that a relatively inefficient model of unstructured observation and feedback is being employed. Strategies for maximizing the benefits of supervision and support (e.g., delivery of specific training modules) need to be explored and tested. And an analysis of supervision costs should be conducted.

■ ***Is all this sustainable in the absence of international PVO intervention?***

Part of the cost of setting up and running village schools in Kolondieba has been financed by USAID through Save the Children. USAID will be providing the funds to multiply this model to include some 1,500 schools across the country over the next five years. PVOs/NGOs are being invited to submit proposals to support community schools. While this may represent a working model for getting village schools off the ground, it is inherently unsustainable because it is based on external funding. As discussed above, unless the government establishes mechanisms that can take over the funding and support roles played by PVOs and NGOs, villages will eventually be confronted with having to bear the full cost of primary schooling. Again, there are inequities embedded in a model that does not imply state contribution to the cost of village schools. Taking the Kolondieba experience to scale requires that a strategy for addressing sustainability be developed. Proposals for launching village schools should include an indication of how a USAID/PVO-supported effort will make the transition to a Malian sustainable approach.

SOME VALUABLE LESSONS

What is most interesting about the USAID/Mali and Save the Children experience in Kolondieba is that it has tested several important concepts of education reform. In so doing, valuable lessons have been learned that apply to other countries and other USAID programs in Africa confronting similar constraints to the improvement and expansion of primary education. This paper concludes by summarizing some of those lessons.

■ ***Village schools provide access to formal primary schooling in areas where government is not delivering services.***

The initial success of the village schools in Kolondieba appears to demonstrate that Save the Children's initial assumption that given proper training, each community already has the financial and human resources necessary to provide highly relevant primary education for its own children is true. While communities may be unwilling to incur the cost of educating their children in official schools that are both literally and figuratively too distant from them, they are willing to incur the cost of schooling their children in a locally relevant context (that, when all direct and indirect costs are computed, may well actually cost less). A workable model for broadening access in situations of perceived low demand for education may be at hand if governments can develop mechanisms for supporting what communities want and are willing to organize.

■ ***Changing the school-community relationship can have significant payoffs in school quality.***

Inherent in the use of this model (or some form thereof) as a strategy to expand access is that lower

cost, community-based schooling does not imply a compromise in school quality. Part of how village schools are able to provide quality education at a significantly reduced price is the changed nature of the relationship between the school and the community. Relevance, ownership, and commitment, far from being merely the latest fashionable buzz words, have been concretized in Mali through the village school model, and have proven to be important factors in determining the quality of the school environment and experience.

- ***There are virtually cost-free reforms that have high returns.***

Too often hopes for improvements in basic education have depended on bringing about increases in the availability of qualitative inputs such as textbooks, teaching materials, desks, etc. One irrefutable lesson of village schools has been the importance of changing the parameters around which primary schools are organized. In terms of promoting local ownership and participation and facilitating access and retention, making the school calendar and school hours local decisions are effective interventions with no direct costs. Allowing school committees, parents' associations, or their equivalents to decide when school should be in session and for how long immediately conveys a changed relationship between the school and the community (and the state and its citizens). And of course, it makes it much easier for families to address the opportunity costs of enrolling their children in school.

- ***Schools can accomplish more with less by doing less.***

In addition to the changed nature of the school-community relationship, another factor that has permitted village schools to succeed has been the use of more-focused educational objectives, which is best reflected in the reduced curriculum and length of the school day. Village schools have essentially been able to develop literacy and numeracy in roughly one-third the teaching time of official public schools, and with teachers that have far less formal education than their official counterparts. The high promotion and low dropout rates testify to the efficiency of such an approach. This increased efficiency of instruction has been possible through an almost exclusive focus on literacy and numeracy, and the provision of instruction in local language. This contrasts to an official primary curriculum that was overcrowded with subjects and hence did not devote sufficient time to the acquisition of basic language skills in French. Initial evidence indicates that once children have a foundation of literacy, the introduction of French is greatly facilitated. The emergence of the NEF in Mali, which introduces local language instruction and which focuses the curriculum on basic skills, demonstrates that this lesson has not escaped MEB officials. Most education systems in Africa could benefit from a refocusing of the over-burdened primary curriculum on basic language and math skills.

- ***Teacher qualification requirements are not absolute.***

In addition to making schooling more efficient, a focused curriculum also contributes to the schooling system's ability to make use of less-qualified teachers. Village schools are receiving effective teaching from personnel with very low qualifications, partly because the training of those teachers was able to focus on methodology specific to language and math skills acquisition. Too often education reform efforts assume that achieving higher quality instruction requires more highly qualified teachers. What the Save the Children model implies is that the opposite is true, provided that the curriculum is focused and the relationship between the school and the community is redefined. These two reforms in most cases would lead to cost savings in the education system, as opposed to cost increases associated with reforms focused on increased inputs and more highly qualified personnel.

- ***There are benefits to involving multiple actors and partners.***

Perhaps the most important lesson of the BEEP project's support for village schools has been the

utility of promoting the participation of multiple actors in the education sector. In addition to the work done through Save the Children, USAID/Mali has also worked through another U.S. PVO, World Education, to involve local NGOs and parents' associations in reforming the relationship between schools and communities. As a result of the involvement of a variety of actors, local support for school improvement is widespread, local institutional capacity for supporting educational reform is being developed and reinforced, local advocates for education reform are emerging, and government's perception of the nature of its relationship with these various partners is changing. All of these payoffs are rewards to the Agency's efforts to broaden participation in education programs.

CONCLUSION

In general, an important lesson that the Agency can draw from USAID/Mali and Save the Children's experience is that some aspects of the alternative models for delivering formal primary schooling that have been tried in Asia and Latin America are also implementable in Africa. The village schools in Kolondieba are one successful African case that other countries and programs on the continent could examine as USAID pursues working through public-private partnerships to address the expansion and improvement of primary education.